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BOOK REVIEW

BENEDETTA BREVINI, ARNE HINTZ, AND PATRICK MCCURDY (EDS.)
BEYOND WIKILEAKS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF COMMUNICATIONS, JOURNALISM AND SOCIETY
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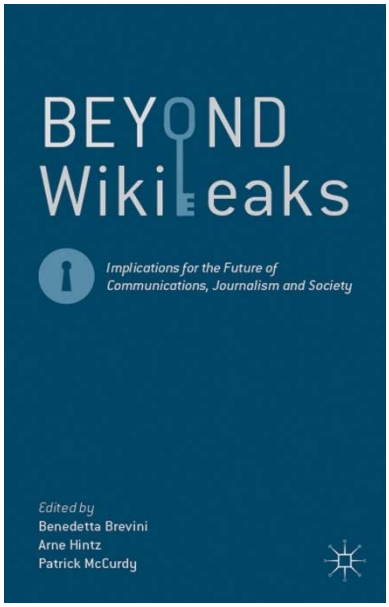

WikiLeaks has been a shock to the system. Not only because of its occasional revelations that have exposed among other things murder, corruption, and questionable political deals in different parts of the world, but also for setting off ripples of implications for individuals, institutions, states, and international relations. WikiLeaks has also shaken the way media organizations operate and has initiated new channels of information flow and forms of communication, collaboration, and engagement. While WikiLeaks has certainly had a massive and transformative effect on current practices, it is not an isolated phenomenon. It is rather an expression of higher-level societal developments caused and enabled by the advent and spread of digital media, and intertwined with complex political, economic, and cultural changes. WikiLeaks has also polarized opinions on what the organization does and how it does it, and on the people involved. Its present and longer-term effects will diverge, often in an extreme manner.

There is an emerging body of literature that seeks to frame and contextualize the history and impact of WikiLeaks. This is not necessarily easy as many things are still developing, and it is hard to step back and situate the multiple and multi-faceted effects of WikiLeaks on global politics, media, and communications. One of the best texts so far to live up to this challenge has been the volume co-edited by Brevini, Hintz, and McCurdy, *Beyond WikiLeaks: Implications for the Future of Communications, Journalism and Society*. The book is an excellent example of rich interdisciplinary scholarly work, which while analyzing and theorizing remains true to the facts and accessible to those unacquainted with either the theoretical approaches or WikiLeaks itself. The book is a fine mixture of expert contributions in media and communication studies and law, along with insights from insiders who have been intimately involved with WikiLeaks or its media partners. The book thus offers an apt

platform to discuss "the richness and wideness of the consequences of the WikiLeaks narrative" (pg. 4).

The volume starts off with a foreword by Birgitta Jónsdóttir, a Member of the Icelandic Parliament and a chief sponsor of the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative, who was part of WikiLeaks in the organization's early years. She offers her account on the series of turbulent events, including her involvement in the disclosure of the "Collateral Murder" video (in which American soldiers in Iraq were shown allegedly killing civilians), and more generally contemplates the power and promise of the WikiLeaks revelations and the organization's game-changing impact. While this narrative is engaging, some readers may have doubts about the book's impartial and nuanced approach towards WikiLeaks. These doubts however are completely disposed of over the rest of the volume.

After a well-written and structured introduction by the editors, the book opens with a chapter by Yochai Benkler, who is a master of putting evolutions into perspective, as proven by his seminal book *The Wealth of Networks* (2006). Benkler does not disappoint here and offers thoughts on the emerging pattern of the "networked fourth estate," which combines elements of traditional news media with the new forces of media production such as WikiLeaks (pg. 11). Benkler's chapter is a valuable contextualization that traces the new networked public sphere constructed from intersecting models of production including conventional mass media, mass media aggregation sites, non-profit organizations focused on professional journalism, non-profit peer content producers, political party presses, and ultimately individuals (pg. 13-17). In his analysis, Benkler is particularly careful to remain unbiased and depicts the complexity and fluidity of contemporary media spaces without labeling "old" journalism as good or bad, or "new" media engagement as shallow or progressive. He places WikiLeaks's partnership with legacy media in this context, and argues that there is a need for collaboration between the networked and the incumbent models of journalism, so that the goal of a vibrant public sphere can be attained. Although the transition to this cooperative mode will not be easy, Benkler concludes that anxiety must be resisted "if we are to preserve the robust, open model of news production critical to democracy in the face of economic and technological change" (pg. 30).

The book's second chapter by Benedetta Brevini and Graham Murdock is an original take on WikiLeaks and the political economy of disclosure. It urges us to "follow the money" and explores the costs of sustaining radical platforms of disclosure, financially and in terms of people and skills. While WikiLeaks is taken as a case study, the chapter goes beyond it and reflects on the various restrictions to the imagined model of Internet freedom. The authors identify marketization, security, and geopolitics as the key drivers of closure (pg. 36-39), and weigh the chances of counteracting these forces. They argue that "The increasing control exercised by the leading commercial corporations points to the continuing need for counterinstitutions based on ideals of public service" (pg. 52). Such institutions should operate at all layers of the communication model (physical, logical, and content) so as to reinvigorate democracy under the present conditions (pg. 52).

The third chapter, "The Leak Heard Around the World? Cablegate in the Evolving Global Mediascape," by Lisa Lynch (referring to the very large leak of diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks in 2010) is highly informative and offers a thoughtful analysis of the lesser-known second and third

stages of WikiLeaks' media collaborations. Lynch reflects critically on WikiLeaks's overall strategy to work with large mainstream media and thinks of the potential impact of the organization's messages on the global public sphere under different circumstances. She suggests that "WikiLeaks may have made a Faustian bargain in partnering with the mainstream press, but in the absence of that partnership, it is doubtful that alternative information pathways would have brought the leaked cables to broad public attention" (pg. 71).

Chris Elliott's chapter changes the analytical perspective from one of academia to one of a media organization actually involved in cooperating with WikiLeaks. As an insider of this process, Elliott reflects on the hard choices that *The Guardian*, WikiLeaks's British partner, had to make when publishing the leaked documents. The discussion is situated in the frame of the intrinsic mission of the media to act in the public interest. The chapter tests the limits of the free press acting in the public interest when compelling interests intersect and other vital values, such national security, are affected. Elliott gives a thoughtful account of the moral case for publishing and how the Guardian journalists discussed, assessed, and balanced the risks.

The following chapter by Hopeton Dunn links with previous discussions on the cooperation of WikiLeaks with legacy media. Dunn aptly frames the WikiLeaks narrative in the evolution of media in the network society and identifies the changed patterns of media creation, distribution, and consumption. Dunn argues that under these conditions old and new media entities need each other, "Because without the strictures and standards of professional journalism and the frameworks of self-regulation in mainstream media, online whistle-blowing organizations run the risk of compromising the security, lives, and reputations of countless people. But equally, without the boldness of WikiLeaks wrongdoing or corruption in government and corporate circles might have gone unreported" (pg. 97). Dunn argues in this sense that the "uneasy marriage of necessity" between traditional news entities and WikiLeaks may eventually become "a stable cohabitation of the public sphere and will help to redefine the character of media and the meaning of 'news'" (pg. 85).

The next five chapters of the book move from media landscape analyses to enquiries into the disruptive effects of the WikiLeaks model upon dominant articulations of power in societies, and the challenges that WikiLeaks poses for the current balance between secrecy and openness in domestic and international politics. Chapter 6 by Einar Thorsen, Chinda Sreedharan, and Stuart Allan analyzes whistleblowing as a complex phenomenon and discusses how different acts of radical disclosure have been framed and perceived in history. The role of digital technology as a potential game-changer in such revelations is also noted. The rest of the chapter offers a detailed and original enquiry into the framing of Bradley Manning and the different existing perceptions of him in the media, the government, and other institutions, ranging from hero to villain.

Chapter 7 by Patrick McCurdy adds to the historical analysis. It goes back to the Pentagon Papers as an act of revelation similar to WikiLeaks and compares the case of Daniel Ellsberg back in 1971 to that of Bradley Manning more recently. It considers how far WikiLeaks and its release of a cache of classified American documents are representative of changes in the potential and practice of leaking. McCurdy introduces digital technology as a transformative factor and discusses how the rise of the

network society has democratized the practice of disclosure and has positioned digital information and its networked flows as a source of risk.

In the following chapter, Arne Hintz starts a broader discussion of the new opportunities and challenges for freedom of expression in the digital age. He asks what WikiLeaks tells us about current practices of censorship and explicates several key dimensions of the policy environment that need to be considered. Hintz argues that information control, access to infrastructure, surveillance, critical resources, and physical repression are the parameters that matter, and these are where conflict between openness and oppression occurs and is likely to continue in the future.

In Chapter 9, Dwayne Winseck adds to this analysis by examining the particular role of commercial Internet service providers in his contribution "Weak Links and WikiLeaks: How Control of Critical Internet Resources and Social Media Companies' Business Models Undermine the Networked Free Press." By focusing on the link between Twitter and WikiLeaks, Winseck raises important high-level questions on users' rights, the role and reach of commercial entities that control critical Internet resources, and what the implications of this may be for information flows. He points out that "Happy stories about digital democracy should not deter us from the harsh reality that important open-media principles have already been badly compromised, and more are at stake yet" (pg. 175-176). The next chapter by David Banisar and Francesca Fanucci explores the intricacies of balancing openness and secrecy in contemporary societies. By taking the example of the United Kingdom, they trace the traditions of secrecy and their evolution over time, as well as the possibilities for reform and modernization.

The focus is somewhat changed in the rest of the book's contributions, as the authors seek to find whether WikiLeaks has triggered a new generation of social movements, online activism, and engagement. The chapter by Stefania Milan introduces the theme by analyzing the changing organizational forms, practices, and identities of both online and offline activism, using recent examples like the Anonymous network and the 2011 Occupy protests. She endorses the concept of "cloud activism" and seeks to identify and explain the specific characteristics of these new forms of activism. Milan believes that projects like WikiLeaks and Anonymous "represent the nucleus of an embryonic social-movement wave that puts individuals and their individualized digital media at the centre" (pg. 204) and that any future form of engagement would inevitably have a strong online component. Gabriella Coleman takes this lead and discusses in her chapter one particular instance of online activism, Anonymous. She offers an interesting and detailed account of the culture and evolution of this loose network of hacktivists and considers the tension between the anti-celebrity ethic displayed by Anonymous and the actual growing visibility of their hacking and leaking activities.

In the following short chapter, Jillian York reflects on the impact of WikiLeaks on political initiatives towards transparency by using the particular historical setting of political changes in the Middle East and North Africa. She argues that in light of the controversy surrounding the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, "it is unlikely that the platform will carry global transparency efforts forward, but rather that will be done by one of its many successors. Ideally, a robust landscape of whistle-blower platforms would exist, taking away the risk of personality cult that undoubtedly occurred with

Assange" (pg. 233). Chapter 14 remains geographically in the Middle East and North Africa. Its author, Ibrahim Saleh, situates WikiLeaks in the specific political and media context of the region and the technological opportunities of new social media. By tracing concrete leaks of corruption and other acts of government wrongdoing and their impact, he suggests that alternatively accessible information has been a significant factor in fuelling discontent.

Chapter 15 by Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemens starts to wrap up the book's narrative by offering twelve provocative theses on WikiLeaks. On the one hand, the authors argue that WikiLeaks is a product of the decline of the dominance of the United States and the decline of investigative journalism. On the other hand, WikiLeaks can also be seen as a product of progress, regarding information and communication technologies in particular. Lovink and Riemens are critical of Assange's role and point to the fatal limits of WikiLeaks as a UPO (unique personality organization). Summing up, they make the point that, "Despite all its drawbacks, and against all odds, WikiLeaks has rendered a sterling service to the cause of transparency, democracy, and openness" (pg. 252). The book ends with an edited transcript of a public conversation between WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Julian Assange and the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, moderated by journalist Amy Goodman. The interview is engaging as it offers the authentic views and opinions of the WikiLeaks mastermind and one of its most ardent observers. Naturally, both endorse the WikiLeaks project of radical disclosure and dismiss its critics.

Overall, and as noted in the beginning of this review, the book offers an excellent and nuanced analysis of WikiLeaks and its real and potential impact. Although there is sometimes a slight repetition of a few key arguments, such as the role of digital technology and the virtues of cooperation between old and new media, the book's contributions otherwise complement each other while covering the wide palette of topics associated with the WikiLeaks phenomenon. It raises important questions by looking beyond WikiLeaks toward the precarious and potentially distorted balance between openness and secrecy in modern societies, as well as to the multiple points of control in the digitally networked environment and their effect on free speech. In this sense, the book not only makes a valuable contribution to understanding WikiLeaks and the world we are left with after Cablegate, but it also addresses critical questions of the sustainability of a robust public sphere in the digital age.

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